



Al Young

"Poetry is serious business"

African American poet, novelist and teacher Al Young traveled across India in March and April for a series of poetry readings and lectures on art and spirituality in African American culture, charming his audiences with metaphors and imagery. The focus of his literary work is the multicultural and multilingual American society; and he said he felt a strong kinship with India since it, too, is a culturally diverse society.

Young, 66, mixes his verse with music, a legacy of his father, a jazz musician. In fact, he began his own career as a musician and often appears with musicians as he reads his poems. "If you have the element of music within you, whatever skills you have, this love of yours will play an instrumental role in sharpening your creativities and making them more profound and effective," he told SPAN.

He feels poetry is not merely about "express-

ing a rosy side of life; rather it is a genuine reflection of a culture. It's serious business." His recent work, *Straight No Chaser*, has political overtones, and Young acknowledges his recent poems have a more overt social and political agenda than earlier ones. "It should not raise eyebrows," he says. "In fact, if the subject of your poetry is a human being or the modern world, then you certainly cannot keep yourself aloof from political references."

In India, Young interacted with literary figures, faculty members and college students during programs organized by the Cultural Affairs Office of the U.S. Embassy at Chennai. He traveled to Kochi, Kottayam, Thiruvananthapuram, Chandigarh, New Delhi, Calcutta, Bhubaneswar, Behrampur and Cuttack. He spoke often about building a society with love and harmony. Young said he had collected Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* and Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* before his first tour of India, in 1991. He said they have influenced him deeply.

Young's poems and other works have been translated into several languages, including Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Russian and German. Some of his well-known writings are *Mingus-Mingus*, a memoir, *Drowning in the Sea of Love*, a musical memoir, and the anthologies *Heaven*, *Conjugal Visits* and *The Sound of Dreams Remembered*. He has also written criticism, essays, screenplays and novels.

—Anjum Naim

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